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AUTHOR(S):

Mizokawa, Ai

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Young Children's Social and Cognitive Development: A Response to Jon Gurney

AI MIZOKAWA
Graduate School of Education, Kyoto University

INTRODUCTION

Humans have many common rules for living together. How do children come to accept these rules? The aim of this paper is a response to John Gurney's paper from the view of developmental psychology, especially to his proposition that *we can walk between objectivity and subjectivity, between 'they-rules' and 'I-rules' and find a form of 'we-rules'*. The question I would like to ask in this paper is 'how' children come to accept these rules in the way like adults. Firstly, I talk about development of fundamental cognitive abilities to accept concepts as 'we-rules'. After accepting 'we-rules' to some extent, young children sometimes show activities as if they are free from 'we-rules' since they have not fully attached to the structure of our social world. In the second part, I give an introduction of pretend play and consider what is going on in the developmental process where children accept concepts as 'we-rules'. Then I address a developmental course of emotional rules.

FUNDAMENTAL COGNITIVE ABILITIES

In the first part, I will talk about development of fundamental cognitive abilities which are minimum required to accept concepts as 'we-rules'.

Children's fundamental cognitive abilities to accept concepts as 'we-rules' develop in 9 months to a year after birth. One of the most important ability is joint attention (cf. Carpenter, Nagell & Tomasello, 1998). From around 9 months, infants appear to share attention with others and understand looking and pointing as object directed actions. Please imagine the situation in which a mother teaches her child the concept CAT. A mother has a concept of CAT as 'we-rules'. She looks at a cat and tells her child 'Here! That's a cat!' The child looks at where she is looking and knows what 'a cat' is. After building up such experiences, children come to learn CAT as 'we-rules'. By sharing attention with others, children gradually come to be aware of the existence of both their own perspective and another's perspective. By joining attention with others, children come to accept concepts as rules of our world. Representation, as referred in Gurney's paper, is also one of the fundamental ability to accept concepts as 'we-rules'. When we think about some concept, mental representation of the concept we have heard about is activated. Mental representation of absent objects or past events develops between 18-month and 24-month (Piaget, 1937/1954), and children come to be able to hold a representation of CAT in their mind to know that the cat they saw in the past and other cats they are watching or will meet in the future are also cats.

PRETEND PLAY

With the development of representational ability, children start pretend play. In the second part, I give an introduction of pretend play and consider how children come to accept concepts as 'we-rules'. Pretend play is one of the most interesting activities of children. Young children often engage in pretend play, where they enjoy being free from the constraints of 'we-rules' and apply special rules of a pretense world. In their pretend play, we could find a clue to know how children get engaged and come to join our world. Developmental psychologists have been interested in pretend play. In the 1940's, Jean Piaget reported that children begin pretending at around 18 months (Piaget, 1945/1962). For the last two decades, many researchers have been focused on children's understanding of pretense to reveal their development of mind (e.g., Lillard, 2002). To understand pretend activities, we should hold the rule of our real world separate from a special rule of pretense world. When we see a woman pretending that a pencil is a microphone, for example, we should keep *the pencil* as *a pencil to write with*, and at the same time *as a microphone to talk with*. An experimental study by Paul Harris and his colleague showed that 2-year-old children recognize that others are engaging in pretense. When 2-year-olds were shown an experimenter pretending to squeeze some imaginary substance over one of the two toy pigs, they responded correctly by producing suitable action, such as cleaning the pig (Harris & Kavanaugh, 1993).

I will report two short episodes from my own observations at a kindergarten. These are the pretense episodes of a 4-year-old girl and a 5-year-old girl. I start from the episode of the 4-year-old girl.

The girl stirred sand in a cup. She said to me that 'It's hot cheese!' She is pretending that sand is cheese. Then I made an interrupting question to her. 'Is this real cheese?' She smiled and said 'It's real cheese!' I asked her again, 'It is sand, isn't it?' but she just said 'It's real cheese. It's hot!' and continued to stir it.

Let us move on to the other case.

The 5-year-old girl was playing in a sand pool. She tried to make a cake from sand and water. Of course, she did not make a real cake from sand. She was just pretending. I asked her the same kind of question as I did to the 4-year-old girl. 'Is this a real cake?' This 5-year-old girl answered that 'Yes, it's a cake. I'm pretending that it is a cake but it's really truly sand.'

In these two episodes, sand as sand corresponds to 'we-rules' and sand as cheese or cake corresponds to 'I-rules'. The interesting point is that the 4-year-old girl should be aware the concept SAND as sand normally was apart from the 'we-rules' in her pretend play. Once she stops pretending and comes back to the real world, she should accept sand as sand successfully. She just departed from 'we-rules' temporarily during her pretend play. The 5-year-old girl, on the other hand, perfectly held 'we-rules' and enjoyed 'I-rules—a special pretense rule' at the same time. The difference between them can be explained by how much they are used to 'we-rules' in our social world.

As children grow, pretending declines. Children of school age seem no longer feel delight in pretense as young children do. Why does pretense become uninteresting for school children? To answer the question, Gurney's idea on 'we-rules' drop us a hint again. We adults have been built up numerous interactions with others for many years, so we understand that others act on the basis of their acceptance of 'we-rules' to produce coordination and not directly on the basis of how the world is. Young children have not fully attached to the structure of our social world so it is easy and

natural for them to engage in pretend play activities. As they are less constrained by 'we-rules' than older children or adults, they enjoy pretend play freely so much.

Children might start from the Humpty Dumpty-like thought where they are the master of the rules of the world. The fundamental abilities to accept concepts as 'we-rules' develop between 9-months and 24-months from birth. The episode of a 4-year-old girl who was stirring 'real' hot cheese in her pretend play gives us an interesting finding. Children who know 'we-rules' on common substances such as sand sometimes go too far from the rules in some situation such as pretense. Via experiencing fluctuation between 'we-rules' and 'I-rules', they come to attach to our world.

EMOTIONAL RULES

In preschool years, children come to live in a more social, more complex world. Lastly, I will talk about the development of more social rules: emotional rules. In social settings, we follow display rules. Display rules, broadly defined, refer to the rules of emotional expression in the social world. These rules are related to emotion regulation. Thompson defined emotion regulation as 'the extrinsic and intrinsic processes responsible for monitoring, evaluating, and modifying emotional reactions, especially their intensive and temporal features, to accomplish one's goals' (Thompson, 1994). Applying to the definition, display rules mean 'modifying emotional reactions'. Display rules serve as the guide to determine when and how we express emotion in front of others.

To assess development of display rules, a disappointing gift paradigm (Saarni, 1979) has been frequently used in previous studies. In this paradigm, children accept an undesirable gift in the presence of an experimenter. Though they feel disappointment as a result of receiving the unwanted gift, they are constrained by the social norms that one must smile when receiving a gift. It is found that even 4-year-olds could spontaneously conceal their negative emotions when given an unwanted gift (Cole, 1986; Josephs, 1994). Interestingly, in respect of understanding that real and apparent emotions can be discrepant sometimes, 4-year-olds have many more problems than 6-year-olds (e.g. Harris, Donnelly, Guz & Pitt-Watson, 1986).

As Josephs (1994) suggested, children might experience other situations in which expressive control is effective though empirical research had been restricted to the disappointing gift paradigm. For example, children sometimes express fake crying effectively and elicit caregiver's attention and helping behavior. I am interested in how children come to understand about such emotional expression. In our society, adults tend to educate children 'display rules' to express positive emotions such as happiness or delight and hide negative emotions such as sadness or anger. They rarely ask children to express negative emotion. However, young children do show emotional expressions as if they seem not to accept emotional 'we-rules'.

One of our studies examined when children understand that one can express *fake crying* (Mizokawa & Koyasu, 2007). In the study, children completed our original tasks which include story with protagonists' fake crying. At the end of the story, children were questioned if the protagonist was actually crying or not. The interesting findings of the investigation were following two points.

(1) 6-year-olds could understand false crying despite the sociocultural tendency to promote children to express positive emotion and hide negative emotion, and

(2) 4-year-olds could not understand such expression at least on a conscious level though they seem to use crying effectively in communication with others.

How do children come to understand such expressions? Most determinants of the developmental process are unknown. Now I am studying about the topic from the aspect of their cognitive development and social function of expression of crying and sadness. It is important to note that we sometimes set aside 'we-rules' to communicate with others effectively, such as false crying for attracting attention.

CONCLUSION

As I have been discussing throughout this paper, Gurney's idea helps us to think about how children attach to our world. By viewing and by investigating children's social and cognitive development, some hints about how humans find 'we-rules' could be obtained.

However, as I mentioned, many questions on this topic are still open and more research is needed. Furthermore, there is a need to reveal not only how humans find 'we-rules' but also a dynamic system of relation between self and these rules.

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